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ABSTRACT

Reasons for the structural or functional classification of the Russian /y/ as an allophone of /i/ are explained in this article. Theory countering this classification, proposed by L.V. Scherba and L.R. Zinder, is also presented. Additionally, comments by Kenneth Pike support the author's criticism of the structuralist approach to the problem. (RL)

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IS THE RUSSIAN /y/ AN ALLOPHONE OF /i/?

THERE IS NO FULL AGREEMENT among students of Russian phonetics as to the phonemic status of the vowel /y/. Whereas some general textbooks on the Russian language traditionally give it a separate treatment, the authors of most modern specialized works, notably Boyanus,[1] Steinitz,[2] and more recently Avanesov[3] and Halle,[4] simply represent the Russian /y/ as a positional variant of /i/. It is noteworthy that the discrepancy of opinion does not concern the physical, i.e., articulatory or acoustical side of the vowel in question, which by now is known in the most minute detail. The phonemic status of /y/ is a problem of classification of sound segments, and as such fully depends on the underlying phonemic theory. Although, according to Daniel Jones,[5] to attempt a definition of the term "phoneme" is to attempt the impossible, several working concepts of "phoneme" can be and have been applied to the particular problem of Russian /y/. The structural or functional approach to the position of /y/ in the phonemic system of Russian has resulted in its being classified as an allophone of /i/. The argument runs as follows:

The phonemic nature of Russian vowels is determined by two distinctive features: the degree of tongue elevation and the presence or absence of labialization. The Russian vowels also differ from each other with regard to the series, i.e., the movements of the tongue along the horizontal. This feature is environmental, positionally conditioned, and therefore not phonemic; but it is, however, an essential part of the respective positional variant. In Russian, /i/ and /y/ belong to the same type of sound; /i/ is formed in the front of the mouth and /y/ is formed in the back of the mouth, but the two sounds are articulated in a similar way: the former with the front of the tongue raised close to the front part of the palate, the latter

[1] S. C. Boyanus, *Russian Pronunciation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955).
[2] Wolfgang Steinitz, *Russische Lautlehre* (Berlin, 1933).
[3] R. I. Avanesov, *Fonetika sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo yazyka* (Izdatelstvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1956).
[4] Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of Russian* ('s-Gravenhage, 1959).
[5] Daniel Jones, *The Phoneme: Its Nature and Use* (Cambridge, 1950), p. 8.

with the back of the tongue raised close to the back of the palate. Both /i/ and /y/ are non-labialized, and in that phonemic characteristic differ from /u/. Russian speakers use /i/ initially and after a palatalized consonant. The softness or the hardness of the following consonant is a factor in allophonic distribution but does not influence the choice of the basic variant, which is thoroughly dependent on the nature of the preceding consonant.

On the other hand, /y/ never occurs initially and can be used only after a hard consonant. /y/ is therefore a mere positional variant of /i/; the latter, because of its greater freedom from the phonetic environment, must be considered as a self-supporting phoneme, or the principal variant of the general phoneme /i/. Being phonetically similar and mutually exclusive as to the environments in which they occur, /i/ and /y/ comply with the two requirements postulated by structuralists for the positional variants of a single phoneme.

Among the authors who do not deny the Russian /y/ the status of an independent phoneme, L. V. Shcherba[6] deserves special attention. His arguments recently were taken up and expanded by L. R. Zinder.[7] These two phoneticians emphasize the potential capability of the Russian /y/ to keep apart utterances. Their opinion bears out the following statement by Daniel Jones: "The sounds of separate phonemes do not necessarily distinguish words, but they are capable of doing so, and generally do so. It occasionally happens, however, that no pair of words can be found in which the sole difference lies in the substitution of one particular phoneme for another."[8]

In his argumentation, Shcherba[9] relies on the intuition of the native speaker—a procedure that can not be fully discounted. He points out the ease with which /y/ can be isolated and the word /ýkat'/ coined; in the latter, /y/ in initial position is contrasted with /a/, /o/, /e/ of the words /ákat'/, /ókat'/, ékat'/. Confusing the synchronic and diachronic planes of investigation—an attitude typical of Russian linguists—Shcherba explains the historical reasons for the relationship between these two vowels.

[6] L. V. Shcherba, *Izbrannye raboty po russkomu yazyku* (Moskva, 1957), pp. 178-179.
[7] L. R. Zinder, *Obshchaya fonetika* (Leningrad, 1960), pp. 64-65.
[8] Op. cit., p. 14.
[9] Loc. cit.

L. R. Zinder[10] also mentions the ease with which a speaker of Russian can substitute /y/ for the initial /i/ in any word. The resulting combination of sounds, e.g., /yl/, /ykra/, /ygra/ for /il/, /ikra/, /igra/, is meaningless. In his terminology, the result is the complete "destruction of the word." If /y/ were an allophone of /i/, the said substitution would merely hamper understanding, or it would be perceived as a "foreign accent." Furthermore, Zinder quotes another two words contrasted by the sounds under discussion, viz., the names of the Russian letters /i/ and /y/. In his opinion, this fact alone should prevent the investigator from lumping these two sounds in one phoneme.

In addition to the objections voiced by the above authors, the structural approach to the /i/-/y/ problem does not seem to be fully justified in the light of the following considerations:

1) Kenneth L. Pike says:

> . . . the sounds of a language are automatically and unconsciously organized by the native into structural units, which we call phonemes. One of these sound units may have as submembers numerous slightly different varieties which a trained foreigner might detect but which a native speaker may be unaware of. In fact, if the native is told that such variation exists in the pronunciation of his sound units he may emphatically deny it. For a speaker to recognize subvarieties of his own sound units, he may need many hours of training. People are much more readily made conscious of the distinctive sound units in their language than they are of the submembers of the units. The native speaker can more easily be taught to recognize and symbolize the difference between two of his phonemes than between two submembers of phonemes. If he has a hard time learning to distinguish between two sounds in his language, they are probably not phonemically distinct.[11]

Obviously this is not the case of the Russian /i/-/y/. In the linguistic consciousness of native speakers /y/ differs from /i/ just as much as it differs from /a/, /e/, /o/, or /u/. If the essential characteristic of a phoneme in structuralist terminology is its "otherness," the Russian /y/ possesses that characteristic in a very high

[10] Loc. cit.
[11] Kenneth L. Pike, *Phonemics* (Ann Arbor, 1947), p. 57.

degree. Whether or not this statement should be labeled as a "mentalistic" conception of the phoneme is irrelevant.

2) If /i/ and /y/ are one phoneme, the Russian orthography uses two symbols to represent this phoneme. Why not suggest then that one of them be abolished in accordance with Kenneth Pike's opinion that ". . . a practical orthography should have one symbol only for each phoneme lest the student learning to read have difficulty in remembering which one to use when they do not reflect any distinction of sound which he can hear."[12]

How would Russians react to such a proposal? No doubt negatively, and this not merely because the vowel in Russian script serves to indicate the softness or hardness of the preceding consonant (the latter could be indicated by other means). They would feel that a distinct and characteristic sound of the phonetic system of their language has no corresponding sign in the alphabet.

3) According to Pike:

> . . . in order to be submembers of a single phoneme, sounds must be phonetically somewhat similar, or else one could not be considered an environmental modification of the other. Query: Just how similar must the submembers be in order to be similar enough? We do not know. In doubtful cases the investigator must utilize symmetry and structural pressure to help him decide. No pressure seems strong enough, however, to force into a single phoneme English /h/, which occurs only at the beginning of syllables, and English /ŋ/, which occurs only at the end of them."[13]

It seems that symmetry and structural pressure have been unable to erase the phonemic distinction between the Russian /i/ and /y/.

4) Furthermore, is it correct to say that /b'it'/ and /byt'/ are distinguished solely by the opposition of soft /b'/ to hard /b/, if the /y/ in /byt'/ is just a positional variant of /i/? It seems that to most native decoders the main distinction between the two messages lies in the opposition /i/-/y/, rather than in the opposition of soft /b'/ to hard /b/. Shcherba[14] maintains that the difference between soft and hard labial consonants in Russian is minimal, and, sometimes non-existent.

[12] Ibid., p. 208.
[13] Ibid., pp. 63-64.
[14] Op. cit., p. 175.

But even from the point of view of distributional characteristics the investigator is equally justified in considering hard /b/ and soft /b'/ as two variants of the same phoneme. Because of unvoicing in final position, the opposition of hard /b/-soft/b'/ can occur only before back and front vowels respectively, i.e., it is determined environmentally.

5) Finally, there is sufficient evidence to assume that the words /b'it'/ and /byt'/, or any similar pair, are not identified by one segment only, by one phoneme. The message is received in its entirety as an entity.

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